

EPA backs off after fracking probe

Staff sought more study of Pa. wells' water

By NIKOLA BANERJEE
Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — One year ago, the Environmental Protection Agency finished testing drinking water in Dimock, Pa., after years of complaints by residents who suspected that nearby natural gas production had fouled their wells.

The EPA said that for nearly all the 64 homes whose wells it sampled, the water was safe to drink.

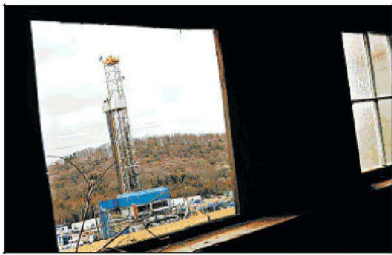
Yet as the regulator moved to close its investigation, the staff at the mid-Atlantic EPA office in Philadelphia, which had been sampling the Dimock water, argued for continuing the assessment.

In an internal EPA PowerPoint presentation obtained by the Tribune Washington Bureau, staff members warned supervisors that several wells had been contaminated with methane and substances such as manganese and arsenic, more likely because of local natural gas production.

The presentation, based on data collected over 4½ years at 11 wells around Dimock, concluded that "methane and other gases released during drilling including air from the drilling" apparently cause significant damage to the water quality.

The presentation also concluded that "methane at significantly higher concentrations in the aquifers after gas drilling and perhaps as a result of fracking and other gas well work."

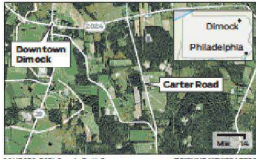
Critics say the decision in July 2012 by EPA headquarters in Washington to curtail its investigation at Dimock over the objection of its on-site staff is a troubling pattern at a time when the Obama administration



Fracking operation near Dimock, Pa., has led to complaints that natural gas production has fouled residents' wells. In 2012, the EPA decided to curtail its investigation in the area.

Water quality studied

The EPA sampled drinking water in 2012 in the Pennsylvania township of Dimock for contamination possibly linked to nearby natural gas production. Some water samples collected from wells along Carter Road showed the presence of methane and substances such as manganese and arsenic.



SOURCE: EPA, Google Earth Pro

tion has used the sharp increase in natural gas production to rebut claims that it is opposed to fossil fuels.

In March 2012, the EPA closed an investigation of methane in drinking water in Parker County, Texas, although the geologist hired by the regulator confirmed that the methane was from gas production.

In late June, the EPA dropped a study of possible contamination of drinking water in Pavillion, Wyo.,

environmental group.

The EPA confirmed the authenticity of the presentation about the Dimock wells but said it was the work of one employee.

"The presentation represents one (on-scene coordinator's) thoughts regarding 12 samples and was not shared with the public because it was a preliminary evaluation that requires additional assessment in order to ascertain its quality and validity," said EPA spokeswoman Alecia Johnson.

"The sampling and an evaluation of the particular circumstances at each home did not indicate levels of contamination that would give EPA reason to take further action," Johnson added.

"We don't know what's going on, but certainly the fact that there has been such a distinct withdrawal from three high-profile cases raises questions about whether the EPA is covering up pressure from industry or antagonistic members of Congress," said Kate Sindig of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an envi-

ronment Committee, said at a recent hearing.

Robert Jackson, professor of environmental sciences at Duke University, who has researched methane contamination in the Dimock area and recently reviewed the presentation, said he was disappointed by the EPA decision.

"What's surprising is to see this data set and then to see EPA walk away from Dimock," Jackson said.

"The issue here is, why wasn't EPA interested in following up on this to understand it better?"

The EPA staff presentation about Dimock was an interim analysis of water sampling data collected by Pennsylvania regulators and later by the EPA, from 2008 to June 2012.

The presentation provides charts for nine of the 11 Dimock-area wells, tracking natural gas production work in the area and the concentration of methane and metals over a four- to five-year period, depending on the well. Some wells underwent a "short-term disruption" or a risk to methane in the water due to eight months after nearly gas development activity.

Over two or three years, the concentration of methane fell.

Four other wells experienced long-term disruption to their water quality, according to the presentation.

In those instances, methane levels did not fall over time but remained high after an initial increase or began to climb after a period of decline. The presence of the metals such as manganese and arsenic also rose over time in some of these wells.

A study by Jackson and other Duke scientists published in June indicates that drinking water wells near natural gas production in northeastern Pennsylvania, including Dimock, are at greater risk of methane contamination than those farther away.

Methane is the primary component in natural gas.

In enclosed spaces, such as sheds and basements, it poses the risk of asphyxiation and explosion. There is little research into the long-term effects on human health from prolonged exposure to methane in drinking water.

Scientists and regulators say that when methane ends up in well water, it is usually because of faulty metal casing inside a natural gas well that allows methane to seep out as it travels to the surface or shoddy concrete work that is supposed to keep gas and water from moving into the space between the well casing and the rock.

Though EPA officials concluded that Dimock water was safe to drink, the mid-Atlantic EPA office nevertheless asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to evaluate the health risk.

Cabot Oil & Gas Corp., the company drilling in Dimock, asserts that the methane in the water is unrelated to oil and gas development. "Through our investigation, Cabot concluded that methane gas existed in groundwater and water wells in the Dimock and Springville townships long before Cabot began drilling in the area," said Dan Drings, Cabot's chief executive, in a May 29 letter to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Fred Blasser, a former official at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection who worked on the state's Dimock studies, disputed the presentation's assertion that some wells contained Marcellus methane.

Blasser said there was not enough information about the composition of the methane in the wells to draw conclusions about the origin. "It's dangerous and inappropriate to interpret this data in a vacuum," he said.

nbanerjee@tribune.com

Senate clears 5 NLRB nominees under truce

By MICHAEL A. MIRMIRAN
Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Senate confirmed five members of the National Labor Relations Board on Tuesday, meeting the final conditions of an agreement reached earlier this month that forestalled a change to the chamber's rules that allow a minority to block action using filibuster.

But the brinkmanship that had the Senate on the verge of a "nuclear" showdown could return this fall as the Democratic majority seeks to move quickly on other stalled nominations.

The deal brokered by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and others was limited in scope but nonetheless produced significant results. At one point the possibility that President Barack Obama could be denied his choice for labor secretary seemed very real.

But Thomas Perez was narrowly confirmed for that job as was Gina McCarthy to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

And with Tuesday's vote the NLRB, which had faced an effective shutdown next month, instead will have a full slate of Senate-confirmed members for the first time since 2003. All of them will serve for the remainder of Obama's term.

The board arbitrates disputes between labor and management in unionized workplaces.

Those confirmed to the board were Democrats Kent Hironaka, Nancy Schiffer and Mark Potoski, who is currently the chair-



MARK WILLIAMS/GETTY PHOTO

The next fight could be over Mel Watt, Obama's choice to lead the Federal Housing Finance Agency.

Senate committees as of Tuesday morning, with 40 more waiting on final floor votes.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has called for additional votes this week, starting with Todd Jones, Obama's nominee to be director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Haggard, he would be the first person confirmed to that job in seven years.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said last week that Jones' nomination could be the "beginning of the next round of controversy."

Democrats, however, are now optimistic that there would be more than the 60 votes required to break a filibuster on the Jones nomination, after the National Rifle Association announced it would remain neutral on his choice.

The gun lobby had opposed previous nominees.

Reid has also scheduled a vote on Samantha Power, nominated to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. She is expected to face Monday's "open question."

The next nominee Republicans seem to be going up to fight is Mel Watt, a former member of Congress from North Carolina, announced in May as Obama's choice to lead the Federal Housing Finance Agency.

Even McCain, who has signaled a greater willingness to work with the administration, said he could join fellow Republicans in seeking to block Watt's installation.

"This agreement did not prevent us from blocking any nomination under any circumstances. And if anybody thought that, they were wrong," he said.

Republicans question Watt's qualifications to lead the complex agency.

At his confirmation hearing before the Senate Banking Committee, ranking Republican Sen. Mike Caputo of Idaho also questioned the "political nature" of the choice, while praising acting director Edward DeMarco as having the technical expertise to lead the agency.

Republicans have supported DeMarco, who has blocked several efforts by the administration to use the agency's authority more aggressively in combating foreclosures. DeMarco has argued that the administration's plan would put taxpayer money at risk. He remains acting director until a nominee is confirmed.

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., said there was resistance among Republicans to "putting a politician into a regulator's role."

Reid confirmed Tuesday that no vote on Watt is possible before the Senate breaks Friday for a month-long recess.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., one of a group of junior Democrats who have called for filibuster reform, told constituents that no vote on Watt is due to block Watt he would renew his call for rules changes.

mmirmir@tribune.com



Firefighters work a fire at a Blue Rhino propane plant Tuesday in Tavares, Fla. Explosions lit up the sky for miles as thousands of propane canisters detonated.

5 in critical condition after gas plant blasts

By AMY PAVUK AND STEPHEN HUBAR
Tribune Newspapers

TAVARES, Fla. — The five-night fireball that set off a series of explosions at the Blue Rhino propane depot in central Florida, injuring eight workers — five critically — may have been sparked by equipment failure and human error, fire officials said Tuesday as federal authorities investigated the incident.

Exhausted but relieved firefighters said casualties and damage could have been far worse as three bulk storage tanks, each holding 10,000 pounds of liquefied propane, witnessed the searing heat that melted employee vehicles parked in a company lot and high-speed strikes by flying propane canisters.

"These fires Chief Keith and Keith said, 'We don't think there was any act of sabotage.'"

Agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, part of a team that investigated April's deadly fire and explosion at a

fertilizer plant in West, Texas, were expected to arrive late Tuesday.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which had previously cited Blue Rhino's operation for a serious safety violation in 2011, also has opened an investigation into the blast incident, said Lindsay Williams, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Labor.

Tavares Mayor Robert Wolfe said on a tour of the devastation Tuesday that he has confidence in the company's safety record.

Blue Rhino is a subsidiary of Overland Park, Kan.-based Forgas.

If it was as different if they were continually getting (cited) by OSHA on safety issues, but they haven't," Wolfe said as firefighters worked to contain larger tanks, a city official said. Officials said it was under control.

"The fact that these things didn't explode that's the reason I go to church on Sunday," said Eric Wages, a fire battalion chief.

Workers at the Blue Rhino plant take old propane cylinders clean them, refurbish them, fill them and then package the tanks for shipping. As of Monday there were about 53,000 20-pound tanks on site.

The fire came from three canisters, most of which ignited in the blast. Due to the intensity of the flames, Keith said, firefighters had to let it burn itself out to some degree.

On Tuesday thousands of burned, twisted tanks littered nearby railroad tracks and parking lots.

The three bulk tanks on the property — which hold a total of 30,000 pounds of propane — did not ignite in the fire, Keith said.

However, on Tuesday afternoon an inspector found a small leak in one of the larger tanks, a city official said. Officials said it was under control.

"The fact that these things didn't explode that's the reason I go to church on Sunday," said Eric Wages, a fire battalion chief.

apavuk@tribune.com